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Rockport Planning Board

Rockport Town Office
101 Main Street
Rockport Maine, 04856

Dear Members of the Rockport Planning Board,

As some of you will remember, I was Town Manager during the time period that this project was in the planning stages. I am sorry that I am not able to attend in person as I am out of state until March or I would be there in person. In fact, if it weren't for COVID, I would fly home to participate in person, that is how strongly I believe that the hotel should be allowed to move forward.

For the record, I am writing to express my complete and total support for the proposed hotel development in Rockport.

The development of this hotel was part of a lengthy town effort to bring more businesses into the Harbor Village that spanned years before the project arrived before the planning board.

First I will address the key points of contention whether it is “harmonious with the existing architecture” and the parking question. Followed by my take on the history behind the project which you may or may not find relevant or useful.

I believe that the hotel not only meets the harmonious architecture of the harbor village, it exceeds it.

The exterior of the building has exceeded my expectations for design and fit within the village.

The attention to detail and workmanship that has gone into the exterior this far, has positively added to the look of the village and after a few years, the building will look like it was built 100 years ago. In my opinion, it far exceeds the conceptual design done by the Leucadia Corp many years ago. It incorporates the arches that were used in the library construction and many masonry details reminiscent of past historical buildings in the region.

Harmonious architecture is a purely subjective term and it is my opinion that the new building meets or exceeds that consideration. Rockport's village architecture is made up of a wide variety of architectural styles that all fit together and make the village unique. I believe that a small group of opponents to the hotel development are opposed for a variety of unrelated reasons, none of which really relate to the harmonious architecture of the building. It is important to remember that there was a large, multi-story building on the lot until it was torn down sometime in the 80's. I don't have access to a photo of that building but I am sure that this building looks every bit as good as that one.

A lot of discussion has been centered around parking and the requirements put in place by the Town and whether they apply here or not.

In my opinion these parking regulations, developed by well meaning Planning Boards are often a hindrance in economic development efforts. These regulations are often based on square footage or seating standards and do not consider the larger picture. While parking is important and consideration should be given to it, the regulations often do not allow for the fact business would be reluctant to locate, where it is impossible to park. In extreme cases, parking regulations lead to vast wastelands of asphalt that lie largely empty with the exception of a few weeks around Christmas. In the words of our previous planner Bill Napjauer, "a parking problem in the village is actually a good problem to have". I lived on Chestnut street at the time and drove through the village many

times a day and at all hours of the day. I was always happiest when I saw the streets lined with cars, meaning the businesses were busy.

As part of the Library construction project, the town did an in-house parking study of all the available spaces within the village district and if my memory serves me correctly, we found that there were approximately 120 parking spaces within a prescribed, walkable distance of the library and many more within a 5 minute walk. I do not have access to that study at the moment, but it should be available through the town records. When parking for the library was considered it was the town's planner's opinion that the regulation did not apply to the library or the Village District, as parking throughout the village was adequate. He also used as that basis for his determination the previous action by the Planning Board for Union Hall.

To see how the parking in the Village actually functions you need only look to the sold out events at the Opera House. With an approximate 400 person capacity, sold out events would conservatively generate 100-125 ADDITIONAL cars in the village that find parking and enjoy the event. With a maximum of 20 rooms in the hotel, it could in theory generate as many as 20 cars, if fully occupied.

The Town had a plan to provide 14 parking spaces for the library. But, because of neighbor(s) pressure, that additional parking in the village was NOT necessary, that parking was reduced to 7 spaces by the Selectboard. So which is it?

The parking, owned by the hotel developer, on Sandy's Way is largely unused and is most often used as public parking for events held at the opera house. It is my understanding that the Planning board waived the parking regulations for the Union Hall and Shepard building reconstruction project before I arrived. It was also clear that the town was looking forward towards the development of the empty lots owned by Leucadia at the time.

I believe it is a HUGE mistake to limit development in the village because of perceived parking issues. Parking is a factor that needs to be managed appropriately, with proper planning, signage, enforcement and

penalties for lack of compliance. Additionally, there are several conceptual plans for additional parking in the village that have been developed over the years including, additional parking in the lower lot near the Goose River, additional spaces that could be constructed and has been designed by the sewer pumping station on Central, as well as “head in” parking on the north side of Central that was roughly laid out within the ROW to gain additional spaces. Finally, I believe that the developer has stated that he is willing to provide remote valet parking for hotel guests at a remote site.

Will parking be more of a challenge, possibly. But as stated previously, it is a good challenge to have, it means that the efforts to revitalize the village to its former glory, were successful. It is a challenge that can be met with creative thinking and ingenuity.

I would ask the Planning board to consider that voters in Rockport passed several ordinance changes to allow the hotel to move forward which led to the way it was planned and designed. The developer voluntarily altered his plans to meet the few concerns that the planning board and ORC expressed early in the process. Public hearings were held by the Planning Board AND Selectboard on the amendments that allowed the hotel project to proceed with very little public response or interest. When the votes were taken, a record breaking number of people voted in the election and the decisions on the zoning amendments. I don't remember the exact number of people that voted in these elections but it was above 70% as I remember and of the people who voted 70 percent supported the changes.

Contrast that with the small number of people that it took to get the petition warrant article on the ballot and the small number of people who actually voted on the election and you will have a tough time getting to the point where the support of the hotel is not there and this effort to stop economic development is a really small portion of the voting population. To not grant the approval needed would be a slap in the face to the many who have supported the development.

In closing and on a personal note, the developers and owners of the properties that are proposing the hotel are in my opinion caring and

considerate members of our community. They get it. They are NOT developers from away, that have a minor interest in Rockport, They are local people committed to improving the village. You can often see Stu and Maryanne walking through downtown in the evening. Or Stu or Tyler working on the existing buildings. They could turn a quick and easy profit on these properties by selling condos for huge dollars, to people that would use them a few months of the year and the windows would be dark the rest of the year. That is not what they are about.

I sincerely hope that you will look favorably on this proposal.

Thank You,

Richard C. Bates

Addendum - Additional Background History

When I started my job in Rockport in June of 2013, it was made clear to me that economic development was to be a priority of my job during my tenure. Very early on, it was obvious to me that the redevelopment of the village was of critical importance to Rockport as a piece of the mid-coast Maine economic development puzzle. Rockport needed to be more than the little town on Route 1 between Rockland and Camden, on the way to Bar Harbor and Acadia National Park. We were blessed to be bookended by two unique and vibrant communities, Rockland and Camden. We had a beautiful harbor and a quaint little, underdeveloped, quintessential Maine village.

As I started to explore the options available, one important scenario was the redevelopment of the Harbor Village. Fortunately, Leucadia Development Corp. had taken an interest in Rockport and had bought up several properties in the village and had made a substantial investment in the Shepard building and the historical rehab of Union Hall. I met with Mike Sabitini, who was the local contact for Lucadia at the time and discussed the plans for the redevelopment of the Harbor Village that Lucadia was considering. He showed me drawings done by a local designer that showed the Central Street conceptual elevations and while I don't remember if the elevations showed both vacant lots they owned at the time with buildings on them, they did clearly show a multi story structure on the lot between the Shepard building and Union Hall that they were planning. I think at the time they were open to either condo development or a hotel on the lot. But they had not yet decided.

It was clear to me in conversations with Mike that they intended to develop all the properties in the Village, including the empty lots between the Shepard building and Union Hall and the vacant lots between the Shepard Building and Mary Lea Park. Remember, there were buildings on each of these lots until recently. In fact there were buildings on the north side of Central street in Rockport's heyday.

Things changed for Leucadia and they decided that they no longer had interest in the Rockport properties and they were considering putting them all on the market. I don't remember the year, but suffice it to say this was a potential devastating blow to Rockport.

I reached out to Stu Smith to let him know of the impending availability of the site in Rockport. He probably knew about it prior to my contact, but I like to take credit for my small part.

Not only were they considering selling their properties in the Village, they were going to sell their property on Glen Cove to a private landowner who was dissolving the subdivision and would revert it back to single family use. This was a HUGE hit to our tax base at the worst possible moment and the village redevelopment was stopped in its tracks.

Fast forward several months and Stu came to the Town Hall to let me know that he was buying the property for a hotel. Infact , he was eventually buying all of the properties Leucadia owned on Central. This was great news for the town.

For several years the hotel development plan percolated. Economic development rarely happens with the flip of a switch, it is often many years of work and this is the case here. Many pieces needed to be considered and fit into place for the hotel project to move forward and with patience and considerable compromise, the project was finally able to move to the Planning Board.